

**University of Tasmania submission to the Australian Government  
Productivity Commission – Barriers to Exports: Productivity  
Commission Issues Paper**

**Minor amendments to the Masters Degree Specifications, approved by the  
Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Council**

One of four areas of focus for the Commission is to “Examine the domestic barriers to growth in Australian services exports, including any investment barriers, and consider appropriate policy remedies”<sup>1</sup>. The University of Tasmania considers that one domestic barrier to growth in education services exports is the recent 2014 minor amendments to the Masters Degree Specifications, approved by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Council. The Volume of Learning explanation<sup>2</sup> provides that the Volume of Learning of a Masters Degree (Coursework) is typically 1-2 years. It is our view that this unclear statement is the genesis of much confusion and a potential barrier to services exports.

The main concern is the change to the former Volume of Learning statement in the *AQF Second Edition 2013*<sup>3</sup> that adds into the 2014 Addendum to AQF Second Edition January 2013 Amended Qualification Type: Masters Degree<sup>4</sup>, “The volume of learning must take into account the level of the previous qualification and / or knowledge and skills required for entry and whether the purpose is for deepening or broadening knowledge and skills”<sup>5</sup>. This effectively heightens the confusion in the Volume of Learning statement and the deepening or broadening issue has always been a problem for Australian Business Schools.

For instance, a student undertaking an MSc who has previously completed a BSc is considered to be deepening their knowledge; but for the MBA it is not so clear cut. Another example is, if an Engineering student undertakes an MBA they would be required to embark on two years of MBA study.

The one year MBA has been touted as being ‘the’ product by most business schools, including Harvard, Wharton, as well as leading UK and European schools. In this context there is no doubt that some Australian universities lose out internationally.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Government 2015, Barriers to Services Exports: Productivity Commission Issues Paper <http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/services-exports/issues>

<sup>2</sup> Australian Qualifications Framework 2014, Volume of Learning: An Explanation <http://www.aqf.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Volume-of-learning-explanation-v2-2014.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Australian Qualifications Framework 2013, The Australian Qualifications Framework Second Edition <http://www.aqf.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/AQF-2nd-Edition-January-2013.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Australian Qualifications Framework 2014, Addendum to AQF Second Edition January 2013 Amended Qualification Type: Masters Degree <http://www.aqf.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/AQF-Addendum-2014.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Australian Qualifications Framework 2014, FAQs <http://www.aqf.edu.au/aqf/in-detail/faq/>

### **Two year Post-Study Work Visa**

Since post-study work (PSW) arrangements were introduced in March 2013, the Higher Education sector has been monitoring the demand for two year (in reality only 92 week) masters degrees by international students. Graduates who have completed a Bachelor degree, Masters by coursework degree or Masters (extended) degree in Australia are eligible to apply for a two year post-study work visa.

The general consensus is that PSW is driving demand for 92 week masters by coursework programs at many Australian universities. This growth is linked to the United Kingdom (UK) clamping down on PSW, largely following the massification of postgraduate courses in the UK with many of one year duration viewed as poor in the quality (and volume) of learning. It could be argued that we have the “unfair advantage”.

It is considered that there are opportunities to grow postgraduate coursework offerings at the University of Tasmania that meet PSW and are not restrained by AQF requirements. Examples include extending the University’s postgraduate Master offerings as international students tend to prefer direct entry into a Masters model that has a nested Graduate Certificate and Graduate Diploma and offering dual degrees - Two Masters in Two Years.

It is noted however, that some dual Masters programs will likely have difficulty attracting international students under the new AQF cognate degree requirements, particularly those that require work experience. For example, the Master of Engineering (Civil)/MEI can be expected to attract only limited qualified students with Engineering and Business degrees, plus work experience.

### **Domestic Barriers to services exports – Visa Arrangements**

The University of Tasmania’s response in regard to Visa Arrangements is focused on the challenges faced in recruiting. The grouping is in response to the need to balance the confidences of the recruitment process with the Commission’s request for evidence (including data and specific examples).

At the University of Tasmania, our experience shows that the visa programs significantly affect people’s decisions to join our Institution in three distinct categories of employment: senior academic recruitment, fixed-term positions and in the area of research collaboration.

Our focus in the categories outlined below is on specialist areas of research, where experts of an appropriate calibre usually number fewer than several hundred globally. So, while accepting the place of appropriate visa controls, our emphasis is on the restrictions placed on the University’s ability to attract individuals, the affect this has on our research and teaching; and thereby our ability to export our services.

Each of the three categories illustrate how the visa programs either discourage, delay or prevent people from working with or for the University. This directly impedes the University's ability to export services by increasing costs and creating substantial delays.

As noted in the Issue Paper, many of these factors are being considered in other enquires and studies by the Commission.

### **Senior Academic Recruitment**

Much of our recent experience with international recruitment is drawn from our specialised academic search and recruitment team.

Over the past 18 months, this team has conducted over 40 global search exercises resulting in more than 30 appointments (with approximately half drawn from overseas institutions). They have found that the visa program affected applicants as follows:

- Australian visa processes have a certain notoriety within academia and at least one individual target, in each search process, was unwilling to proceed because of the perceived complexity and slowness of Australian visa programs.
- The visa program does not normally facilitate the commencement of candidates at the ideal start date, which has a number of implications:
  - Multiple visa applications have to be made (usually for a temporary then a permanent visa) to enable a prompt/timely start date. This is an inefficient use of resources for all agencies involved in the process.
  - Preferred candidates become frustrated with the process and explore other opportunities. We have lost two preferred candidates in this manner over the course of the project.
  - An individual joins at an inopportune time in the academic year resulting in missed opportunities and delays in the commencement of projects.

### **Fixed-term positions**

The visas available for those on short-term employment contracts do not provide for healthcare or schooling for children as well as other benefits extended to residents, despite contributing equivalent or higher income tax.

This creates difficulty in attracting postdoctoral fellows and research assistants who simply cannot afford to take up a position – especially if they have a family.

In one Faculty, half of the applicants for such roles withdrew from the recruitment process once they became aware of the above cited difficulties.

**Research Collaboration**

Academia relies on research collaboration and the visa program makes this difficult – even for unpaid researchers.

Again, as an example, the University has a Faculty that collaborates with approximately 70 potential visiting academics to undertake either study leave in our laboratories or are being externally funded from their home country. The nature of the research requires visiting the University, but in 10% of cases, visits are cancelled at the last minute as visas cannot be obtained within a reasonable timeframe (6 to 8 months).